

A Shared Passion for Tree Planting: An SMA Arborist Exchange

by Matthew Stephens, Director of Tree Planting for NYC Parks and Recreation



Tree planting at Casey Tree staff planting • Photo Courtesy Casey Trees

Last fall, both NYC Parks and the not-for-profit organization Casey Trees successfully applied for an SMA Arborist Exchange. This resulted in the first public/private pairing for the program (previously, all participants were from municipalities). The goal of the exchange is simple: to enable urban foresters to share expertise, management practices, and technology through an on-site and immersive experience. To that end, I was welcomed for a few days into the Casey Trees family with open arms! You can read about Casey Trees at caseytrees.org.

During my exchange I visited the Casey Trees Farm, participated in tree planting events, and met with staff to discuss the day-to-day management and the long-term vision of the organization. I was also able to witness firsthand Casey's innovative tree-growing practices at their farm as well as past tree plantings completed throughout Washington DC.

With everyone I talked to, rode along with, or learned from, I noticed one commonality: passion. Passion to inspire the young, to maximize tree survival, to increase canopy—but perhaps most importantly, true passion for the people and trees of Washington DC.

This city is lucky to have Casey Trees, and I can attest that Casey Trees is an expert and trustworthy steward for the urban forest.

On the first day I received a first-class tour of the Casey Trees Farm, where the majority of their trees are grown about an hour outside of Washington DC in Clark County, Virginia. I learned that Casey Trees has a diverse toolbox of tree harvesting techniques, ranging from balled-and-burlapped to root bags to container trees. During the tour, we discussed how each transplanting method has its pros and cons that Casey Trees uses to maximize its efficiency depending on the tree planting project—sort of like a Swiss army knife for tree planting that allows them to use the right tool for the right job. For example, growing trees in root bags allows them to harvest trees earlier in the fall growing season while also easing transport and ultimate handling by volunteers.

We also spent time discussing how urban foresters and the nursery industry still have a long way to go to perfect tree production. Both Casey Trees and NYC Parks have observed that field-grown stock can be ruined by subpar nursery practices. While still at the farm,

I shared a harvesting technique that NYC Parks has worked hard to pioneer that makes a huge difference in tree longevity. Our technique is to ensure that the root flare is exposed or can be seen prior to tree harvesting in the field, which requires that soil that has accumulated on top of the root flare be removed. NYC Parks has trialed this method repeatedly and each time, the results are the same: more roots are transplanted with the tree when the root flare is exposed prior to digging.

Lessons Learned #1: There is a long ways to go working hand-in-hand with the nursery industry to ensure urban foresters start with quality plant material. Quality means liners that have a well-balanced and symmetrical root system, material that is pruned properly and budded or grafted at the right height, material whose progeny we are confident of, and that possess other qualities that predict a long and healthy life. Long-term research has yet to definitively confirm how tree health may be affected by nursery practices, but initial research confirms there is room for improvement in nursery production, and we urban foresters have to hold the nursery industry accountable.

While in Washington DC, I was able to plant a few trees alongside Casey Trees staff. My visit coincidentally aligned with an all-staff planting where everyone rolled up their sleeves to help plant trees in a neighborhood park. This was a perfect team-building event; every municipality or non-profit should replicate it in some



Substandard liner stock • Photo Courtesy NYC Parks



Casey Tree farm in Virginia • Photo Courtesy NYC Parks

manner. I was also able to help plant trees with the youth of DC at one of Casey's elementary school planting events. I was amazed how even on a cold, rainy day a room full of third graders could get so excited about

playing in the mud to plant trees. I also got to see some of Casey's plantings, ranging from a few days old to the initial plantings the organization did after it was formed ten years ago.



Elementary school student tree planting in the rain • Photo Courtesy NYC Parks



Difference in root mass seen when soil is removed vs. not removed to expose the root flare prior to harvest • Photo Courtesy NYC Parks



NYC Parks and Casey Tree staff intermingling • Photo Courtesy Casey Trees

Lessons Learned #2: The return on investment of building a robust network of urban tree advocates/enthusiasts is unquantifiable. Both public and private urban foresters have to figure out a way to carve out at least five percent of their time to develop a corps of urban tree advocates.

As my time in the nation's capital unfurled, I met with staff, from Casey's operation crews to fundraising staff to the executive director, to learn how Casey Trees functions day to day. What became abundantly clear is that the private side of urban forestry is far more agile than the public side. I learned that Casey Trees is able to leverage private dollars or staffing resources to meet an emerging need almost overnight, while I imagined the same change in scope or focus would take no less than six months on the municipal side. It also became clear that municipalities need to leverage the agility of a private or nonprofit firm in unison with their (the municipality's) own larger mission or annual goals.

Lessons Learned #3: The future of urban forestry over the next twenty years will be the merging of public policy and resources with the agility of private funding and ideas. When this delicate balance of public and private is effectively orchestrated, the results are clear: a healthier and more long-lived urban forest.

In closing, Casey Trees is an amazing organization, working on amazing projects, with an amazingly dedicated staff. It's certain they will continue to be at the forefront of urban forestry for decades to come. I want to thank the staff of Casey Trees, including Director of Tree Planting Jim Woodworth, and the Society of Municipal Arborists for allowing me to take part in this exchange and want them to know I am sincerely grateful for this experience. 🌿



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